

Just south of the
Copperstream

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A long time ago...

...in a country not too far away, there lived a king by the name of John IV. He lived in a castle named after him, since that made it easier for everyone to remember both his and the castle's name. The castle sat in the centre of the small town of Johnstorp (also named after the king), where the buildings seemed to grow into each other.

The town was surrounded by a large stone wall with a single exit, so that the king could keep an easy eye on who and what entered his small town. Outside the wall were farming communities, a thick forest, and if you followed the road long enough you'd eventually end up at the Copperstream. Beyond that lied the Great Humps, and a vast desert called the Bareback, and after that...well, who knew?

But this story starts in the town of Johnstorp...

* * *

It was a warm day. The townsfolk had gathered in the courtyard of the castle to hear the king speak. He stood on a narrow balcony with the crown on his head and a golden apple in hand. He looked upset.

- People of Johnstorp! I'm upset! the king bellowed from his balcony.
- HEAR, HEAR! THE KING IS UPSET! a crier in the crowd echoed loudly.
- People of Johnstorp, your great ruler has lost his only daughter! My dear, dear Eusamella!
- HEAR, HEAR! OUR GREAT RULER HAS LOST HIS DAUGHTER EUSAMELLA.
- My dear, dear Eusamella.
- HIS DEAR, DEAR EUSAMELLA. DEAR, DEAR! OH, I MEAN, HEAR, HEAR!
- People of Johnstorp! Need I tell you that I want her back? I think not! People of Johnstorp! Find my daughter, and a great reward will await you in the Office of Grave Errands!
- HEAR, HEAR! FREE REWARDS AT THE OFFICE OF GRAVE ERRANDS!

Applauds and joyful laughter spread through out the crowd now.

- That's not what I said, you monkey! I said there will be a great reward for anyone who...
- HEAR, HEAR! GREAT REWARDS FOR EVERYONE! AT THE OFFICE OF GRAVE ERRORS!

- Quiet you! Guards, arrest that loudmouth!

A couple of guards made their way through the crowd, and pulled away the crier under cheerful applause. The king repeated his plead once more, before heading back inside the castle. Hopefully someone would try to find his daughter, he thought.

* * *

One year passed without a word from the daughter. The king had pretty much given up, since he was a man of reason and not of hope. Besides, he had other matters to tend to, such as taxes and keeping an eye on the hogges in the north, just on the other side of the Copperstream.

If you have never heard of hogges, some explanation may be required. A hogge is a man-sized creature that walks upright just like a human, but that resembles a hedgehog in every other way. They live underground where they feast on snails and worms and other delicacies, or read cookbooks about how to cook snails and worms. The hogges are intelligent creatures with great appetite.

King John IV didn't care much for the hogges. He had fought them in a great battle some twenty years ago, on the very same ground where he later built his castle and founded the town of Johnstorp. The hogges had to flee north over the Copperstream, and start anew in the Great Humps. They didn't understand why the human king needed their lands as well.

One autumn day, a messenger came to see the king in his castle.

- We have found hogges, my king! the messenger said and tried to catch his breath.

- What, where! the king said excited.

- In the Dense Forest, just outside of town, my king!

- What! Send guards there immediately!

- They're already there, my king!

- And?! the king cried. Are they fighting? Are we winning?

- No, my king!

- Are we LOSING?

- No, my king! What I meant was: there aren't any fighting going on, my king.

It almost looked like the king's eye were about to pop out of his head when he heard this. He scratched his nails on his throne and bellowed: - AND WHY NOT, IF I MAY ASK?

- Well, they are...they are...

- YES?

- They are selling candy, my king. And it's quite tasty! And cheap!

The king flew out of his throne and across the room. With a firm grip he shook the messenger so hard that his hat came off, and hard candy started to pour out of his pockets.

- GATHER MY BEST GUARDS! the king cried loudly. NOW! I WILL END THIS NONSENSE!

- Yes, my king! At once, my king!

The messenger bowed and quickly picked up his hat and most of the candy before taking off again.

* * *

A word about the king's daughter may be in order now. Her name was Eusamella and she wasn't exactly the type of daughter the king had wished for. He wanted a daughter that would sit quietly and behave and say things like "Yes, father" and "No, father". He also expected her to marry a prince to take over the throne, to whom she would say things like "Yes, my king" and "No, my king".

Needless to say, this wasn't in Eusamella's interest. She enjoyed reading and talking to people, discovering new places and things, just like everyone else. She had never heard of anyone that wanted to sit quietly and be told what to do and enjoy, yet that was what was expected of her.

One day she found an old, almost hidden book in the castle's library with the title "On Hogges". She immediately started reading, because if there was one thing the king had taught her to be afraid of, it was the hogges. She finished it as quickly as a plate of pudding.

But now she was confused. According to her father, hogges were nasty creatures that ate small children for dinner and then picked their sharp teeth with the spines on their back. The book didn't mention any of that. In fact, according to the book, the hogges were intelligent creatures that liked gardening, playing and reading cookbooks about worms and snails.

Eusamella figured that if her father said one thing about hogges, and a book said another, the best way to find the truth was to keep looking for it. So she searched the great library for another book about hogges, and eventually found one titled "Hogges: Man or Beast?".

After reading it, she was certain that her father the king hadn't told her the whole truth about these strange creatures. Maybe the answer wasn't in the books? They were after all written by humans just like herself, and hogges weren't human but something else. What she needed was something better than a book.

After finishing supper that same evening, she quickly packed her bag and snuck out to find herself a real hogge. Because, if anyone would know anything about the hogges, it had to be the hogges themselves.

* * *

The king rode out from his castle with some of his best guards, and headed for the Dense Forest just outside of town. Heading left at the first fork, they soon arrived at what looked like a crude market: a couple of wooden tables were placed at the side of the road, with carefully placed paper wrappings. Behind each table stood a tall, furry creature that couldn't be anything other than a hogge.

- What is going on here? the king shouted from his horse. What are these hogges doing here?

- They're selling candy, my king, a woman answered. She held a wrapped paper filled with hard candy.

- Candy?! I bet it's poisonous, like all hogge food!

- No, it's actually...really sweet and tasty, another voice said, belonging to a round man. He licked his fingers and fetched another piece of candy from his wrapping. A loud crunching sound followed.

- IT'S POISONOUS! the king shouted, as if he didn't want to hear. STOP EATING IT! THEY WILL ATTACK ANY SECOND NOW!

- Are you sure, my king? one of the guards asked. Their candy's great, and we're chatting about this and that. Did you know...

- ARE YOU CHATTING WITH THE ENEMY? DID YOU LEFT YOUR HEAD BACK AT THE CASTLE, REPLACING IT WITH A BUCKET, SOLDIER?

The guard quickly started touching his head, as if he wasn't sure of whether he had replaced it with a bucket or not. Figuring he hadn't, he sighed and answered the king: - No, my king! I didn't replace it!

- YOU...MONKEY... You there!

The king pointed at one of the hogges. It turned around to see if the king meant somebody else, and then faced the king again with a surprised look.

- Em? the hogge said in its mother tongue.

- He said 'me?', my king, one of the guards explained. It's a bit tricky, the hogges way of talking, but if you...

- I KNEW THAT! the king said irritated, although he didn't really know. Even though he had fought them all those years ago, he never did take the time to understand their language. Or anything about them at all.

- Uldwo ouy keli ot uyb meso ndyca? the hogge asked politely.

- He asked if you would like to buy some candy, my king.

- I bet he'd like that! Poison the king of Johnstorp, that's their plan all right!

- Budd off ge candu ich toichonuzh, woddint ett meen we be suck bei no, one man said with his mouth filled with hard candy. There was a flood of saliva coming out from the corner of his mouth as he tried to chew and talk at the same time.

- What did this man say? the king asked. Has he already been poisoned?

- My king, I believe he said that if the candy were poisonous, wouldn't that mean they'd all be sick by now? another guard explained.

- No, of course not! the king said annoyed. They have OBVIOUSLY only poisoned the candy *I'm* buying! Pfft! Even a cat would have thought of that!

- Etl het ngki uyb meso ndyca, utb etl eonesom seel ate ti, one of the hogges said.

- Ah, that's clever! one of the guards said.

- What? What did he say?

- Oh, I'm sorry, my king, I thought you understood their language?

- I do! I just...didn't hear what he said, with the wind blowing...and all... Repeat what he said, soldier!

- Well, my king, I believe he said 'etl het ngki uyb meso ndyca...'.

- In OUR tongue, soldier!

- Yes, my king! He said: 'Let the king buy some candy, but let someone else eat it'. That way we can see if they've poisoned your candy, my king.

The king thought about it for a moment, and then agreed to do it. He rode over to one of the tables, and pointed at the biggest and brightest pieces of candy he could find. Since the king never carried any money, one of the guards had to pay for the sweets.

- Here, the king said and handed the wrapped paper to the very same hogge that had sold it to him, now you eat it! Let the poison brewer taste his own making!

The hogge shrugged and put one of the red sweets in his mouth. As he chewed, a bright crunching sound followed with each bite. It took no more than a couple of seconds before he was done. The hogge licked his lips and smiled at the king.

- So? the king yelled.

The hogge bowed and said something in its mother tongue. The king – who obviously didn't understand a word – turned to one of his guards with a confused look on his face.

- Well, my king, I believe he said 'thank you'.

- Why? the king yelled. What for? Why is he thanking me?

The guard asked the hogge, who responded in his own tongue.

- My king, the hogge says that's what his mother taught him. He also says this is the first time a king has bought him candy!

The king didn't know what to do. He was more furious than he had ever been, and at this age he had been furious quite a lot before! He rode back and forth along the road, mumbling to himself, until he finally stopped in the middle of the road and exclaimed: - THIS IS AN ILLEGAL ACTIVITY! THIS IS NO PLACE FOR MARKETS! YOU SHALL LEAVE THIS PLACE BEFORE SUNSET, OR ELSE I WILL HAVE YOU ARRESTED!

- But, my king, is that really wise? one of the guards asked. After all, this is where the Forestmarket takes place every fall, so it can't be all that illegal...

- Are you questioning your king? Are you? I'll have you thrown into the dungeon for that, soldier!

- And besides, these lands belong to lady Eusamella. Your domain ends at the fork in the road. My king.

The king didn't respond. When he heard his daughter's name he suddenly remembered her fifteenth birthday and the gift he gave her: the Dense Forest. Even though he had ridden through these parts of the land many times since her disappearance, it hadn't reminded him once of his beloved daughter. Until now.

He turned his horse around and rode back to the castle.

* * *

The hogges continued to sell their sweets in the Dense Forest, and after only a couple of months they had their own marketplace set up where they sold all kinds of things. The king didn't approve of any of this, but what could he do? It was, after all, not his land and his laws and rules didn't apply there.

Week after week he would receive reports about how prosperous the hogges market were, with their tasty candy and interesting cookbooks, or how cheerful and polite the hogges were. People came from all over the country to barter with the furry creatures, and soon the strange tongue of hogge could be heard spoken even in Johnstorp.

But the bartering worked both ways, and before you knew it the marketplace was crowded with humans speaking hogge and hogges speaking the human tongue. Everybody seemed to enjoy each other's company and wares, except for one person: the king.

After riding home from the meeting in the Dense Forest, the king just sat on his throne in his castle, with a firm look on his face. He didn't want to see or talk to anyone, so he locked himself up in the throne room. His hair turned grey, and he didn't care for his beard anymore so it grew all the way to his feet. He just sat there, all alone, in silence.

* * *

About one year after the first market of the hogges, one of the birches in the Dense Forest started to grow unlike anything anyone had seen before. It didn't only grow tall, but wide as well. It grew and grew for two weeks, and then suddenly stopped. It was without doubt the largest tree in the whole forest, if not the country.

Its claw-like branches made the surroundings dark and hostile, and when people passed by they felt like it was watching them. You could spot it from everywhere, because of its unnatural size. The colour of the leaves seemed to fade away, from its usually clear green to something paler at first, until they all one day were grey.

* * *

Another year passed, and it was time to celebrate the third annual market of the hogges. It was a festive occasion everybody wanted to participate in. The candy makers tripled their production to meet the needs of the fair, extra large quantities of snail- and worm puddings were made, and every last brewer among the hogges had to make sure everything was bottled up and ready to be served at the big day.

As the days drew closer, a rumour started to circulate among the townsfolk of Johnstorp that two extraordinary hogges were invited to the event, for the opening speech. Expectations were higher than ever; could it be the very king and queen of the hogges themselves?

* * *

It was the day everybody had longed for; the opening day of the fair. People and hogges from all around the country journeyed to the Dense Forest, all dressed up and eager to start the celebrations. A small podium, built for the occasion, stood in the middle of the road. An older hogge climbed up and cleared his throat a couple of times to get peoples' attention. With a deep voice he said (in the human tongue): - People and hogges, it is with great joy I welcome you to this fair. Let us eat and drink and dance and have fun together. But first, I want to present to you two very special hogges: our king Igel Kott and queen Mellaeusa!

The old hogge stepped down from the podium, leaving room for a rather tall and big hogge with long ears. He wore a crown made of interweaved branches and colourful leaves. As soon as he got up, loud cheers and applauds spread throughout the crowd: the hogges were happy to see their beloved king, and the townsfolk were excited to see a king!

He stretched his furry paw into the audience next to the podium, and helped a new figure up on the scene. But this was no hogge. This creature lacked spines and fur, and didn't even have a small black nose. It could, on the other hand, speak both hogge and human. It said: - People and hogges of all around, I have been away for quite some time, but now I'm back. I used to be the daughter of a king, but now I am a queen of my own. My hogge name is Mellaeusa, but I'm also called Eusamella!

At the sound of her name, a strong wind blew past the crowd. It was cold and hostile, and you could almost follow it with your eyes as it continued deep into the forest. The tall birch swayed in the distance, as something had disturbed its slumber.

- Let the fair begin! Eusamella proclaimed.

- Esy, etl het irfa ginbe! King Igel Kott followed happily.

But the joyful cheers were silenced when the monstrous birch suddenly stretched its branches high up in the sky, followed by a roaring sound, as if it pulled it self up from the ground. The tall tree stood still and swayed for a moment, before it started walking through the forest straight towards the podium!

Not a single oak, pine or ash could withstand the strength and fury of the tall birch as it waded through the dense vegetation, pushing itself closer and closer to the podium where Eusamella stood. She didn't move, but not because she was afraid, no. She knew the best way to handle fear was to meet it, just as she did when she had to find the truth about the hogges. She stayed put.

When it came close enough, the birch reached down to pick up Eusamella. But as it was about to wrap its branches around her, it suddenly stopped and turned its crown around. There, at the trunk, a group of hogges armed with axes were chopping away to save their queen. The birch knocked them over easily with a single whisk, and turned to Eusamella again.

- What are you, foul monster of the forest? she shouted. Why do you wish us harm?

The tree didn't answer, since it lacked any mouth, but a strange feeling of confusion swept through the marketplace. It was as if the birch felt scared and lost.

But now it had to deal with another group of axe bearers, chopping away at its other side. As it turned around to knock them over as well, it hesitated. It was a group of townsfolk from Johnstorp.

While the birch didn't act, the townsfolk didn't wait. More and more axes buried themselves into the trunk of the tree, and with the help of both hogges and other humans, the birch finally fell over to the ground.

Eusamella jumped off the podium and walked over to the dead tree. The grey leaves came off one by one, until every branch was naked. She leaned forward to stroke its bark, but when she touched it a thick root burst through the ground next to it. She touched the tree again, and more of the root came up from the earth.

- People and hogges, queen Eusamella said, I want this tree to come to use. No matter its intentions, we shall not leave it to rot. Turn it to wood and let it warm our souls tonight. Nothing must be wasted.

She then leaned forward and embraced the trunk as much as she could. The ground almost exploded as the thick root immediately sprung forth through the ground, from the base of the birch and disappearing down the road.

- Give me a horse! she shouted. Quickly! I want to see where it leads!

* * *

Eusamella rode alongside the white root, and as she came closer to its source she started to understand. She passed the eastern gate into Johnstorp, rode all the way through town and didn't stop until she stood on the courtyard of the castle.

She got down from her horse, and followed the root up the stairs into the castle. Up, up, and further in, until she stood before the locked doors to the throne room. The root had broken right through, leaving a large hole through which she crept. She walked up to the throne and stopped right before it.

There sat the king. He had turned into a dead tree, a trunk, from which the root had found its way into the dense forest. It had nourished a birch with all his anger and fear of the unknown until he was but a shell of his former self.

She drew her sword and took one last look at the trunk that was her father. With both hands firmly around the grip, she used all her force to cut through the thick, white root. As the blade passed through, the root immediately withered and disappeared. A loud cracking sound rose from the throne as the bark around the king fell off, revealing once again the living person underneath.

Eusamella dropped the sword and helped her father up on his feet. Though he didn't say a word, she could tell he was full of remorse. She hugged him hard, and said: - How do you feel, father?

- Empty, he said with a tiny voice. I feel as if I have been drained of all my feelings.

- Then, dear father, Eusamella said and smiled, I believe we must fill you up again! Come, we're missing the fair!

* * *

It was a warm day in the town of Johnstorp. People and hogges were gathered at the courtyard of the castle to listen to a king they hadn't seen for many years. King John IV stood on the narrow balcony, with his daughter Eusamella on one side and his son-in-law king Igel Kott on the other.

- People of Johnstorp! I'm happy! he said with a loud voice.

- HEAR, HEAR! a crier in the crowd echoed loudly. THE KING IS HAPPY!

- One year ago, on the third annual market of the hogges, I was saved by my beloved daughter Eusamella!

- ARHE, ARHE! another crier, this one hogge, echoed. HET NGKI ASW VEDSA YB EENQU MELLAEUSA NEO ARYE GOA!

- HEAR, HEAR! I AM THE CRIER HERE!

- ON OUY REA OTN! OUY AYSALW ETG TI ONGWR!

- I DO NOT ALWAYS GET IT WRONG! NOT ALWAYS!

- ANYWAY... the king bellowed slightly annoyed. Anyway, if it were not for her, I would've withered away within that shell, forever caged by my fear. This fear and anger were about to harm us all. That which I was afraid of, I have now come to love.

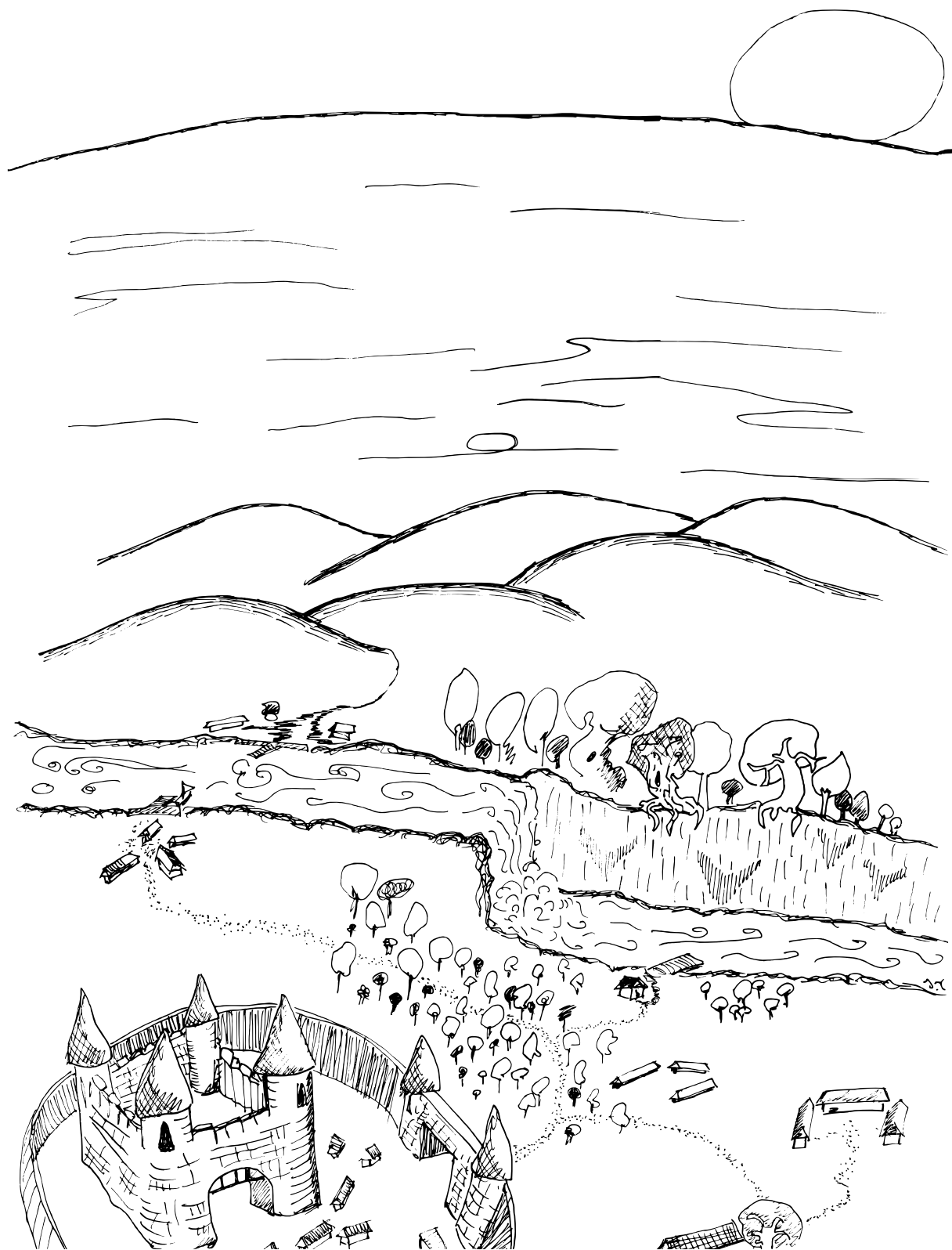
He smiled and patted himself on his belly. Many green and red and yellow pieces of hard candy from the hogges marketplace had slipped down his throat since he first tasted it one year ago.

- I will now hand over the title to my daughter, who will rule together with king Igel Kott. Let there always be peace in these lands, and let there always be hard candy at hand!

With those words, the king stepped down from the throne. It was the beginning of a new era of hogges and humans living side by side, enjoying the best of two worlds.

The former king John IV lived the rest of his days learning everything he could about the hogges, although he could never get himself to truly appreciate the distinctive taste of snail-and worm pudding.

THE END (OR, IN HOGGE: HET NDE)



From top to bottom:
The Bareback, the Great Humps, the Copperstream, the Dense
Forest, Johnstorp (left), farming communities (right)